

Senator SIEWERT (Western Australia) (10.51 am) —The Greens fully support the report of the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs Grasping the opportunity of Opal: assessing the impact of the petrol sniffing strategy. It is a pleasure to work with the Standing Committee on Community Affairs and know that we were all working for the same thing in this inquiry. Once again, we have a consensus report— we all agree on the aims and objectives. While Senator Moore said we slightly differ on a couple of points, we have agreed on the recommendations, which I think is important in dealing with this very important issue. As Senator Moore said, this is following up on our previous very important inquiry, where we also had a unanimous report. Both inquiries were originally referred by the Greens and we are very pleased with the outcome of both reports. We believe this report makes strong and sensible recommendations. This is one of the Senate's success stories where, working together, we are seeing real outcomes on the ground.

The rollout of Opal fuel, together with youth diversionary programs and support, has had a major impact on petrol sniffing in Aboriginal communities in Central Australia. We are very proud to have taken part in that process. This committee inquiry shows that we need to remain vigilant and that we still have a significant way to go. The inquiry found very strong success with the rollout of Opal but also found a number of problems with the rollout of the eight-point plan and a number of issues in places that have fallen between the cracks. In most places, we have, at best, rolled out only three or four points of the eight-point plan and in fact in some places only one—that is, the rollout of Opal. The original report said very clearly that Opal alone will not do the job; it needs to be part of a more comprehensive approach. That is why the eight-point plan was developed in the first place. It is very important that the whole package continues to be delivered and not just part of it. We need to be providing support services and initiatives which tackle the underlying causes of petrol sniffing—boredom, hopelessness and despair. If we do not do this, the problem will only shift to other substance abuse. We had some evidence of that happening with drugs like ganja and alcohol, and people troublemaking again, which also leads to other issues.

Years down the track we still do not have consistent legislation—as in the eight-point plan—across the Northern Territory, South Australia and my home state of Western Australia. Appropriately, with policing we have some but still not at an adequate level, particularly in the APY Lands. There is further rollout of Opal fuel but, as Senator Moore said, there are a number of stations in the Northern Territory which still refuse to stock Opal. That is proving a problem for communities. Also, it enables sniffable fuel to be run out of those particular service stations into other towns, which is happening in Balgo. The particular stations where communities have a lot of concern include Rabbit Flat, Tilmouth Well, Ti Tree and Laverton in Western Australia. While we now have the rollout of Opal to a large number of communities, there are still communities not receiving it. We make recommendations around that problem.

We have some alternative activities for young people and youth workers in some towns but not in others. Where there are both male and female workers, it is operating very well. There were significant problems getting the process underway. There are some treatment and respite facilities in place but not enough. We visited the fantastic new substance abuse centre at Amata. If we could have more of those in communities that would be fantastic. When I asked whether there were any more of these facilities in the APY Lands, the person I was talking to burst out laughing. It is really sad that we do not have enough of those facilities. We had some communications and education strategies. Again there

were difficulties getting them going. Although it is about communication and education, there was not enough communication with the local communities about how to do that. It is very important, when rolling out Opal, that the communications strategy is in place.

With regard to strengthening and supporting communities, some communities have a lot of support; others have not. In our recommendations we strongly recommend an independent evaluation of the Central Australian petrol sniffing unit because we think there are some concerns with the rollout of the eight-point plan. So in the committee report we have recommended that that issue be looked at by government. I would like to see that done as a matter of priority because I think that there are some significant issues that we need to deal with in the delivery of services through this program to Central Australia.

One recommendation in the report says, as Senator Moore highlighted, that we need potentially to be looking at legislation to mandate the supply of Opal through petrol stations and roadhouses. We have recommended that this be looked into to see whether it is a possibility. It is a last resort mechanism—if service stations or roadhouses cannot be persuaded to sell Opal as a matter of priority and urgency, we believe there needs to be a process requiring them to do so. It is so important to communities that we believe governments, state, federal and territory, need to be looking at that as a last resort. We have set a time limit —if governments have not implemented it within six months, they need to then look at legislation.

There need to be many more resources for youth services. We need to ensure that there is a male and a female youth support officer in communities, with both of them delivering services. We need to make sure we have functioning infrastructure such as housing, cars and activity sheds. In Mutitjulu we saw an excellent program where young people are making handicrafts, using batik to make baskets, headbands and bags which they are selling at a local market. They were in a tiny little shed which was not air-conditioned. You can imagine what it was like on a 46-degree day. The young people were trying to make these things in very difficult circumstances.

We need more training for community workers, more rehabilitation services and more adult education and support for ex-sniffers. There is a problem around ganja coming into some of these communities and we need to be ahead of the game there. It was also pointed out that mainstream drug and alcohol campaigns often miss Aboriginal audiences, so we need to make sure we focus those better, and of course the whole underlying issues around schooling need to be dealt with. We need coordination between government departments. Although that is much better than it was, there still seem to be some problems there. There have been problems with the tendering processes, we believe, and this goes back to the issues around the Central Australian Petrol Sniffing Strategy Unit—the CAPSSU, as it is called. We believe those problems need to be investigated as part of the independent audit and evaluation of the unit. Those need to be looked at.

We also strongly support the recommendation that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner be resourced to monitor and report on progress around petrol sniffing. This is such a vital issue. We have made such progress. We cannot stop. We absolutely have to continue it. It has the full support of the committee. It is such a pleasure to go to communities and see what progress has truly been made and, as I said, we cannot stop. We have to remain vigilant and we have to go beyond the eight-point

plan, but we need to ensure we are implementing that as the starting point and we need to ensure that the resources for the rollout of Opal are maintained. I beg the government to please maintain those resources and enhance them where necessary.